

USHA SATYAVRAT

THE RĀMĀYAṆA
AND THE MODERN SANSKRIT PLAYS

The *Rāmāyaṇa* story has served as a source of inspiration to poets and playwrights in India from the hoary past to the present day. During the course of investigations the writer of these lines has come across eight Sanskrit plays in the present century itself which have a bearing on the Rāma theme. Modern playwrights have given it a form and shape as per their own perception of the same which not unoften is coloured by the prevailing circumstances. It is a fascinating study to divine the mind of the creative writers of the present century and see as to how the age-old *Rāmāyaṇa* theme has undergone variations in its treatment at their hands. Out of the eight plays available so far, seven are original compositions while the eighth one is the translation into Sanskrit from the Marathi original. Out of the seven original compositions three have the focus on Vālmīki the *ādikavi*, the creator of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

A brief description of all the eight plays is as follows:

Bhūmikanyā

The play was originally written in Marathi by Rāma Vitthal Warerkar, popularly known as Mama Warerkar and translated into Sanskrit by Ratnamayi Devi Dixit. It is published by Sitacharan Dixit, Delhi, in 1966. The drama has four acts. The main crux of the story has been taken from the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The silent

sufferer of torture of *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* becomes vocal in the *Bhūmikanyā*. That is why the heroine Sītā of *Bhūmikanyā* says: «For all times to come the whole world will sing the praise of brother Lakṣmaṇa for serving his elder brother Rāma and sister-in-law Sītā in the jungle for fourteen long years but, may be nobody will ever remember Ūrmilā, the real sacrificial soul, who though alive, spent in separation all the time as if on live charcoal». At another place she says: «I am the daughter of the soil, whoever tills the soil and has plough in his hand is my brother».

The last lines depict Sītā as a crusader for women's life. Thus she says that: «I am entering again into the earth not to prove myself pure but I perform this act just to avenge the perpetual insult inflicted on womanhood». Sītā also proclaims that the world does not worship Rāma alone but the *mantra* is complete only when it is uttered as Sītārāma. The drama has no Bharatvākya, no happy denouement. The Śambūka episode has been given an altogether a new treatment in the play. When Rāma returns from the forest, the attendants who include the washerman and his wife want to make sure that the room and the bed in it should look exactly as they were when Rāma and Sītā had left them fourteen years back. The bedsheet had a spot which was covered by the deer skin then, the same thing is done on Rāma's return. Rāma notices it and is surprised that the attendants remember the minutest details even after the lapse of fourteen years. He compliments for this the washerman and his wife. After this the wife of the washerman goes to visit her parents telling her husband that she would be back in a month. There she comes across a young man, a Śūdra, a farmer, of the name of Śambūka who is harassed by *R̥sis* for continuing to practice penance which he had learnt from his *guru* who is now no more. The washerwoman takes pity on him and assures the terrified young man to intercede on his behalf with the king and the queen. When she comes back to Ayodhyā after spending long after the time promised to her husband she straight goes to king Rāma and pleads with him to help the Śūdra. She however does not succeed because the king at the advice of the Rājapurohita has decided to punish the Śūdra for doing something which he is not allowed by scriptures. She then darts forth to Sītā who agrees to help him (Śambūka, the young Śūdra), on the basis of a kind of relationship that she thinks

subsists between her and him (Śambūka); she being the daughter of the earth, *Bhūmikanyā* and he being the tiller of the soil, the *Bhūmiputrā*; the relationship being that of brother and sister. The washerman finds fault with his wife for overstaying the stipulated period and putting up with a young low-caste man. He charges her with infidelity for her undue interest in him and ropes in Sītā too in the canard, all women being alike. The canard spreads forcing the king Rāma to abandon Sītā on the pretext of taking her back to some of the places for visiting which she had earlier expressed her desire to him (Rāma). Sītā takes shelter with Vālmiki. So does Śambūka who is punished by Rāma with exile for practising austerities, though an *anārya*, a non-Aryan of low caste. Sītā gives birth to two sons in the hermitage of Vālmiki who are taught by him the *Rāmāyaṇa* which they sing at Rāma's Aśvamedha sacrifice. Rāma asks Lakṣmaṇa to find out their antecedents. Suddenly enters at that moment the Rājaguru, the Royal Preceptor, with Śambūka who had after spending twelve years in Vālmiki's Āśrama in penance had entered Ayodhyā by getting into a group of *Ṛṣis* bound for it to participate in the Aśvamedha sacrifice. A Brahmin father having lost his young son on account of the practice of penance by a non-Aryan tribal, *dasyu*, he (Śambūka) is awarded capital punishment by Rāma which he gladly accepts. Rāma touches his head with his hand and blesses him with salvation.

The two lads singing the *Rāmāyaṇa* are identified by Ūrmilā who appears on the scene suddenly as the sons of Sītā through her intuition. She further points out that the *Rāmāyaṇa* that the lads sing are by Vālmiki who already is in Ayodhyā in connection with the sacrifice. As the last words escape her lips Vālmiki appears on the scene and in the course of the conversation asks Rāma to accept Sītā back to which he agrees on the condition that she gives a proof of her purity to the public through a supernatural act, a condition not acceptable to Ūrmilā and Sītā, particularly to the latter, she having furnished such a proof already. To be called upon to give the proof for the second time she finds too offending to her feminine dignity. If Rāma's worry is his subjects, her worry, says she, is self-respect of womenfolk. She prays to Mother Earth to accept her into herself. In a moment there is darkness everywhere. With a thunder emerges after a while refulgent light. Ūrmilā and Lakṣmaṇa run upto the spot from where Sītā had disappeared. The curtain drops and with this comes to an end the play.

The work very successfully puts focus on the ill treatment of the non-Aryans, the tribals by the Aryans, a point not touched so far by any of the playwrights dealing with the Rāma story. The work is also marked by righteous indignation at the indignity and the humiliation meted out to womenfolk all through the centuries.

Śūrpaṇakhābhisāram

It is a lyrical play in five scenes by Virendra Kumar Bhattacharya and is published by Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta. It was first published in the *Samskrita Pratibhā* of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi in 1973. Its story starts with the singing of a song by Sītā and Rāma with a fulsome praise for her melodious voice. Lakṣmaṇa also joins them. Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to bring fruits from the jungle and return quickly. Lakṣmaṇa gone, Śūrpaṇakhā enters singing and dancing. Her two brothers Khara and Dūṣaṇa are very much satisfied seeing her in good mood and allow her to rejoice and choose a love partner for herself. She first approaches Rāma who sends her in turn to Lakṣmaṇa whom he describes as unmarried. Lakṣmaṇa feeling forlorn due to the absence of his wife Ūrmilā in the forest feels drawn towards her and responds to her (Śūrpaṇakhā's) advances. As he is under her spell, he hears from behind the curtain his brother calling out to him to disfigure the ill-tongued wanton demoness by chopping off her nose and ears which as a dutiful brother he does, though torn by contrary feelings. He condemns his lot and vows to keep Śūrpaṇakhā's memory alive. He prays for her so as not to be cheated in love any time again and moves away from her in slow steps. Though Lakṣmaṇa has been cruel to her, she has no illwill towards him which is a matter for utmost surprise to her friends Virūpākṣī and Vikatāsyā. On the other hand she feels grateful and says that she is fortunate that she could get his affection, though only for a short while. She can never think of a revenge. The whole gist of the drama, the culture of the demon girls, is reflected in the Bharatavākya which is uttered by the heroine, Śūrpaṇakhā, wherein she says: «even a momentary union out of love may lead to the attainment of the supreme bliss».

The most striking feature of this drama is that it is a love drama, the hero is Lakṣmaṇa, the heroine is Śūrpaṇakhā. She has two friends – Virūpākṣī and Vikaṭāsyā. Strangely enough, Rāma plays the part of some one who creates hurdles in the culmination of love among the lovers. Though Lakṣmaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā meet for a short while, they are madly in love with each other. Vikaṭāsyā informs Khara and Dūṣaṇa that Śūrpaṇakhā has gone in for Svayaṁvara in choosing Lakṣmaṇa for her husband:

*rakṣovarasya vākyam hi tathyam evānuvartate
śarvaṇikā vṛṇoty adya naraśreṣṭham svayaṁvarā*
(p. 149, verse 46).

Another amusing fact is that Śūrpaṇakhā herself admits that she is the daughter of a sage and sister of the Lord of demons Rāvaṇa. The drama propagates widow remarriage:

*kanyāhaṁ viditā muneḥ sucaritā rakṣaḥpateś ca svasā
bhartāsīn mama caikadā guṇivaro daityādhipaḥ sundaraḥ
vaidhavyam ghaṭitaṁ tu bhāgyavihitaṁ bhrātur bhramād yauvane
cittaṁ me suciraṁ kathaṁ na bhavati premātyaye marditaṁ*
(p. 149, verse 48).

At one place the story of the *Śūrpaṇakhābhisāram* resembles the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* wherein Śakuntalā has two friends, Priyaṁvadā and Anasūyā. Śūrpaṇakhā has Virūpākṣī and Vikaṭāsyā. Priyaṁvadā and Anasūyā arrange Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā's meeting in a lonely shrub-house. Both Priyaṁvadā and Anasūyā do not divulge the unwelcome incident of Durvāsas' curse. In the *Śūrpaṇakhābhisāram* both Virūpākṣī and Vikaṭāsyā praise the love affair between Lakṣmaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā and rejoice at the Svayaṁvara type of marriage which is going to take place.

Śakuntalā of the *Mahābhārata* argues with Duṣyanta that she would marry him only if her son gets the throne, while the heroine of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is very innocent and there is no mention of any such thing.

Śūrpaṇakhā of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is very vindictive. She ascribes her insult by both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to Sītā and vows to drink her

blood (first) and the two of them (Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa) in an encounter (later) – *tasyās tayos ca rudhiram pibeyam aham āhave*. But the heroine of the *Śūrpaṇakhābhisāram* even when disfigured by Lakṣmaṇa is not at all angry and says the younger brother had to obey the orders of his elder one. Vikatāsyā says:

*katham sakhi nau prāṇaye vidambitā
manān na ruṣṭā khalalakṣmaṇam prati*
(page 163, verse 127).

«How come our fiend is not at all angry with that wicked Lakṣmaṇa even while cheated in love». The *Śūrpaṇakhābhisāram* gives a new turn to the Rāma story by describing the *Śūrpaṇakhā* incident through the insertion of the element of love between *Śūrpaṇakhā* and Lakṣmaṇa which is totally absent in the parent story. Lakṣmaṇa does not come out too well in that. The author of the present play has attempted to absolve him of some of the blame which sticks to him on account of disfiguring the demon lady who is smitten with love and approaches him to beg him of it. The playwright is even by a conservative estimate is not fair to Rāma to whom he ascribes the order to the younger brother to chop off *Śūrpaṇakhā*'s nose and ears. A novel experiment in describing the *Śūrpaṇakhā* incident in new light, the play deserves serious notice.

Rāmavanagamanam

It is a lyrical play in three scenes by Vanamala Bhavalkar published by the Sanskrit Parishad, University of Sagar, Madhya Pradesh. As Bhavalkar herself admits in the Preface, the story of Rāma is very well-known to Indian readers. To make it presentable on the stage she has chosen the most pathetic portion of the same, i.e. the banishment of Rāma to the forest for fourteen years. She has used easy but lucid Sanskrit. The story is told only in lyrics. The dialogues in verse are very small and to the point. The musical touch is according to the situation and emotional content is well preserved. The first scene opens with the appearance of a very happy, almost dancing Kaikeyī

who has just got to know that Rāma is going to be the king early next morning. Her happiness, however, is short-lived as Mantharā, her friend and attendant who had come along with her to Ayodhyā after her marriage, remonstrates her for being so naive and short-sighted as not to be able to foresee her position being that of a mere attendant once Rāma takes over as king. When Kaikeyī is totally under her spell, she advises her to have from Daśaratha, come to visit her in the night, the fulfilment of the two boons promised to her earlier by him in installing Bharata as king and in sending Rāma in exile for fourteen years. Kaikeyī enacts the drama and is able finally to force Daśaratha to accept her demands.

In the second scene Rāma is shown approaching Kausalyā, his mother, to take leave of her to go to the forest. The mother is stupefied. She informs Sītā of what has happened. Sītā insists that she will also accompany Rāma to the forest. Meanwhile Lakṣmaṇa also joins Rāma and requests him to allow him to follow him to the forest. Rāma is very much satisfied that he has such a devoted wife and emotionally attached brother. The jungle would mean a pleasant experience for him in the company of Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa.

In the last and the final scene, when Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa have left for jungle, Daśaratha faints. Kausalyā laments her lot. Sumitrā blesses the exile. Vasiṣṭha at that time appears on the stage and proclaims that Rāma had to go to the jungle because the noble people appear on the earth only to protect the good and punish the wicked:

paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām' vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām

And here ends the lyrical play.

Vanamala Bhavalkar has a thorough knowledge of Indian classical music. She has indicated the melodies or the Rāgas, in which the particular verses are to be sung together with the marking of tune or Tāla, as for example:

Hamīra, Yamana, Kāfī, Sāraṅga, Paṭadīpa, Dhamālī, Vasanta, Khamāja, Desakāra, Māṇḍa, Āsāvārī, Nāyakī Kānaḍā, Purīyā, Dhanāśrī, Vihāga, Aḍānā, Śaṅkarā, Kedāra, Tailaṅga, Deśa, Kalāvati, Tilakakāmoda, Khambāvati, Jogī, Durgā, Dhumālī, Sohanī, Śivarañjanī, Hemanta, Kīravāṇī, Miśrapīlu, Bhīmapalāsa, Tivrā,

Bahāra Dīpacandī, Darbārī Kāṇḍā, Multānī, Bāgeśrī, Toḍī, Madhukarṇsa, Miśramāṇḍa, Mālakarṇsa, Bhairavī.

Tāla

Jhapatāla, Tritāla, Kaharavā, Ekatāla.

Metres

With an equally large number of variety of Rāgas, the author has also used metres, some of which rather uncommon, in her work, such as: Upajāti, Anuṣṭubh, Pādākulaka, Mandākrāntā, Hariṇī, Viyoginī, Varṇśastha, Mālinī, Āryā, Drutavilambita, Vidyunmālā, Śārdūlavikrīḍita, Aṣṭapadī, Indravajrā, Mattamayūra, Bhramarāvartinī, Gīti, Agnyāvartinī, Śikharinī, Pṛthvī, Vasantatilakā, Padmāvartanī, Sragdharā.

It is indeed a magical feat that in such a small play of eighteen pages, Bhavelkar could employ an unusual variety of Rāgas and metres.

Ayodhyākāṇḍaḥ

Written by Y. Mahalinga Sastri the One-act play *Ayodhyākāṇḍaḥ* is published in the Sanskrit Journal of the Sahitya Akademi, the *Sanskrita Pratibhā*, Vol. IV, No. I, 1963.

On account of its title it appears to be based on the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It, however, is not so. It is a social play pure and simple dealing as it does with the theme of the quarrels of a mother-in-law with a daughter-in-law, a common enough occurrence in Indian households. It is the title that has been taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The family quarrels are like those found in this Book of the Great Epic. In the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Kaikeyī plays havoc on account of her foolishness with the happiness and the peace of the family. The hero of the play who is made to go to listen to the story (of the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa*) has the feeling that the same (*Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa*) is being staged in his own house by his mother who is out to destroy the family peace. The *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* thus becomes symbolic of the motherly haughtiness, a tendency to find fault with the daughter-in-law, to nag her, to boss over her. The author, therefore, picks up

this very term for his work which purports to pinpoint this tendency. The *Rāmāyaṇa* supplies him the title.

Yauvarājyam

This one-act play is written by Jaggu Vakulabhushan. It is published in *Samskrita Pratibhā* of New Delhi in its issue of April, 1959.

The story of the work opens with love sports of Lakṣmaṇa and Ūrmilā. Ūrmilā indirectly finds fault with Lakṣmaṇa in that even though he is very much in Ayodhyā after the fourteen-year exile, he keeps himself away from her. Lakṣmaṇa relents, and they have love sports to their heart's content. But soon after Lakṣmaṇa is called by King Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa thinks that the attendant has come to fetch him by mistake. Rāma might have asked for Bharata or Śatrughna but the attendant is sure that Rāma has specifically asked for Lakṣmaṇa. He approaches the jewel-studded palace of Rāma and Sītā. At the gate Lakṣmaṇa notices them engrossed in intimate talk. He hesitates to enter. Meanwhile, royal mothers Kausalyā, Kaikeyī and Sumitrā enter from the opposite door. Rāma bows to them and asks them as to how it is that they have come without any intimation. The mothers say that they are ever eager to see him. Rāma tells them that it must be a case of telepathy for he had himself wanted to consult them about an important thing. He had the good fortune of having Lakṣmaṇa by his side in the jungle all the fourteen years but now having entered the jungle of administration he feels that he is left alone. He wants one of the brothers as Yuvarāja, the Crown Prince to help him in administration. To this Kaikeyī says Lakṣmaṇa alone, by virtue of his loyalty and service to him during the fourteen-year exile, can foot the bill. Sumitrā, however, favours Bharata because he had declined the throne when offered to him. Bharata is called. After a lot of persuasion he is placed as Yuvrāja, the Crown Prince. Just then appears Vasiṣṭha, who takes them all to the Coronation Hall where Bharata is anointed the Crown Prince. Lakṣmaṇa is the most trusted attendant of Rāma. Bharata utters the *Bharatavākya* and on a happy note the play comes to an end.

Two innovations are the most striking feature of this play. One of these pertains to reunion of Lakṣmaṇa and Ūrmilā and the indirect

expression of their emotions. The second pertains to Bharata's coronation as Crown Prince.

Praśāntaratnākara

Published by the Sanskrit Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta in 1939, this nine-act play is described by its author, Kalipada Tarkacharya, as an experiment in a new dramatic technique. The play is based on the story as related in the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* of the *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa*. It has also for its basis, the *Kṛttivāsa Rāmāyaṇa* of Bengal. The author has, no doubt, so transformed the character of the hero and has so thoroughly changed the incidents connected with him that he seems to have assumed a new form at his hands. The present play bears an indelible imprint of the author and, though based on an old and hackneyed theme, has sufficient originality in it to interest the present-day critic. The turns and twists which have been given to the story, make it look refreshingly charming. One of its notable characteristics is the total absence of Prakrits. All the characters in it use Sanskrit.

As young sturdy Ratnākara goes from door to door in search of food which is denied to him, he wants to commit suicide. The moment he is trying to put his thoughts into practice he hears the cry of a woman, who is being oppressed by a dacoit. Ratnākara rescues the lady, the dacoit leader becomes impressed with his unparalleled courage and employs him as the deputy leader of his gang. When Cyavana, the father of Ratnākara comes to know how his son supports the whole family he commits suicide. In the last and ninth act is described the death, one by one of Ratnākara's mother, wife and son. This completely transforms Ratnākara. Once again he tries to end his life but 'Sumati' appears on the scene and consoles him. After this Nārada comes from heaven and gives Dikṣā to him (Ratnākara), who from that time onwards, begins to lead a pure and pious life.

The author attaches great importance to the free style, alliteration and rhyme in his songs which abound in his work. They are racy and crisp. In another of his plays he calls a song as the last limit for all the good things of the world: *gītaṁ loke sarvasaubhāgyasīmā*¹.

1. *Naladamayantīyam*, First Act, p. 2.

Ādikāvyaodayam

It is the second play in Vālmīki series, written by Mahalinga Sastri. It was published in 1963 by Sahitya Candra Sala, Tiruvalangadu, Tanjavur District.

The gloomy clouds of the story of Sītā's banishment gather thick on the background and clear out only in the concluding part of the play. The hero of the play is *Ādikāvya* itself. The play describes the *Udaya* of the *Ādikāvya*, the first poem in world's literature. The most important incident is where Lava and Kuśa recite melodiously the story of their own forefathers. The *Rāmāyaṇa* recitation being over, both wish to study its effect of the same on the minds of the people of Ayodhyā. Finally Rāma expects Vālmīki to present his sons to him formally in public. The appearance of Nārada in the scene brings sunshine in the gloom. Sītā herself emerges from the cleft up mother earth in place of the golden image installed at the Aśvamedha sacrifice. By degrees the spectators realise that instead of the golden image, the real Sītā is restored to Rāma. And that is the happy ending of the Aśvamedha, Rāma united with his wife. The people of Ayodhyā greet Sītā as their queen with worshipful supplication. The golden image itself is recovered later and installed in a temple by the enthusiastic public for common worship.

Vālmīkisaṁvardhanam

Written by Visvesvarā Vidyabhusana Kāvya-tīrtha and published by Prof. Dhyanesha Narayan Chakravarti of the Rabindra Bharati University in 1967, it is the third play in Vālmīki Series.

It is the story of a dacoit called Ratnākara. He is ignorant of the lofty ideas of human philosophy and his livelihood is to deceive, cheat and kill people. Once when Brahmā and Nārada are held captives by him, they preach him the real knowledge. For the dacoit the touch of these two sages, even though for a short time, makes him Sage Vālmīki out of a dangerous dacoit. He is the same person who after becoming Vālmīki sings the immortal song of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This small plot runs into twelve acts. The two innovations of the playwright are: Niṣāda approaches Vālmīki and begs him that he may

be relieved of the curse which the sage had pronounced on him. The sage feels sorry for the poor hunter and repents for his cruel act. Second, the Goddess of learning appears before the sage telling him that it was she who had forced him to pronounce the curse and that he should not take himself responsible for that. The play ends on a happy note with a song by Nārada as *Bharatvākya*.

Conclusion

All these plays discussed above are a pointer to the hold the Rāma story still has on the creative mind of the modern Sanskrit writers. They like to re-tell certain prominent incidents of the main narrative, but with a difference, imparting into them something of their originality and innovativeness. And in this they are not unique, scores of their predecessors in the ancient and medieval periods having attempted the same earlier. The difference in their case is that they have not only brought within their creative compass the Rāma story or certain incidents of it but also the creator of it, the Ādikavi (Vālmiki). It is a fascinating experience to see as to how the compass gives a new shape and orientation to the age-old narrative as also as to how it is shaped to give expression to new social concepts by re-telling the old incidents.